

Iceland in Autumn –Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour report

14 – 20 September 2014



Aurora over Skaftafell



Group pay homage to Great Auk



Skógarfoss



Óxaráfoss

Report & Images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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Introduction

As autumn draws to a close on Iceland, it is the time to enjoy the serenity of the mountains. Colours begin to change in both the landscape and the sky, with spectacular sunsets on a regular basis. As the evenings cool, the northern lights begin to appear, dancing across the night skies.

There are many charming myths and folk-lore legends surrounding the Northern Lights phenomenon, many claiming them to be spirits of ancestors or messages from the heavens. The scientific explanation, as is so often the case, is far less mysterious and enchanting, but enlightening and interesting nonetheless. The aurora borealis are named after the Latin phrase meaning ‘northern dawn’ and are caused by solar winds interacting with the Earth’s ionosphere.

Most of the winds, consisting of charged solar particles sent Earthwards by solar flares or explosions simply pass the Earth by and disappear into space, but some do enter the atmosphere at its weaker polar-points colliding with atoms and molecules which absorb the particle’s energy. In order to return to their ‘normal’ state these atoms and molecules emit photons, or light particles, giving us the phenomenon of the Northern Lights.

The aurora is best seen in between October and March, far away from artificial light, beneath the aurora oval which usually circles the Earth between 60° and 70° of latitude, which makes Iceland an ideal location to witness this wondrous phenomenon. The intensity of luminescence is inextricably linked to sun-spot activity that has a natural rhythm. Waiting for these capricious manifestations to appear can be a long and often cold wait with no guarantee the celestial lights will show on any given night due to solar inactivity or cloud-cover.

Day 1

Sunday 14th September

Heathrow – Keflavik/Gullfoss (184 km)

Weather: Low cloud & drizzle; wind W 12m/s, with temp 10°C

The group assembled at Heathrow Airport for an early afternoon flight north to Iceland. The flight proved uneventful and three hours later we touched down at Keflavik. There was just enough time for a coffee at the airport whilst the bus was organised. Soon after leaving the airport we were travelling along a barren landscape dominated by ancient lava fields carpeted in a grey-green *Rhacomitrium* moss, perhaps giving a false impression as to Iceland's natural beauty and wonderment. Just over an hour's drive and we arrived at the market garden town of Hvergerði, which owes its existence to the rich supplies of geothermal water. We gazed down the geological fault within the shopping mall that appeared during its construction in 1986 and is now incorporated as a novel feature. An hour later and we finally arrived at the Gullfoss Hotel in the dimming light.

The hotel was situated on the very edge of 'wilderness Iceland', the last place before the uninhabited highland region dubbed 'Iceland's Heart'. This vast interior forms the largest wilderness to remain in Europe south of the Arctic Circle, and it has never been inhabited or cultivated. 'Untouched' nature is becoming increasingly rare, and is therefore a great treasure of the future and will become even more special overtime, but only if left unspoilt by roads, fences and power lines.

It was 7pm by the time we arrived and not wishing to waste any time, we quickly found the dining room where we enjoyed a traditional meal of asparagus soup followed by salmon. After a tour briefing and with little chance of the clouds lifting, Malcolm held a camera clinic before we retired after a long day of travel.

Day 2

Monday 15th September

Golden Circle (225 km)

Weather: Low cloud & rain am, brighter pm; wind E 4m/s with temp 9°C

We were greeted by inclement weather this morning that meant we needed to revise our intended itinerary to make the best of the weather. The bishopric at Skálholt, established in 1056 was our first stop. Skálholt's importance as a historical site is second only to Þingvellir's. From the mid-11th century almost to 1800 it was the ecclesiastical centre of Iceland and the focus of all spiritual life, culture and education in the country. The present church, the tenth on the site, was consecrated in 1963; the altarpiece and the stained-glass windows were amazing.

Continuing on to Selfoss we followed the course of the River Sog to its source at Þingvellavatn. We stopped frequently to try and find a Barrow's Goldeneye, but we were possibly a little early for their arrival from more northerly breeding grounds. We had more luck and some excellent views of Great Northern Diver at the hydro-station before arriving at the Nation Park.

Þingvellir is the most iconic place in Iceland, home to the first parliament (Alþing) in 930AD, the birth place of Christianity in Iceland in 1000AD and where two of the earth's greatest tectonic plates are visibly tearing apart. First we walked to the beautiful waterfall Óxaráfoss where we enjoyed an alfresco lunch followed by a short drive to the Interpretive Centre for an overview of the 'rift valley' where the tectonic plates can be seen. We had time for a

leisurely stroll down to the Alping (Law Rock) and enjoyed the unique atmosphere of this very special place before assembling at the car park where the bus had been conveniently relocated.

By the time we made our return journey to visit two of Iceland's most celebrated landscapes, the spectacular geysir, Strokkur and the 'Queen of Icelandic Waterfalls' Gullfoss, the weather had improved. Geysir stood within a large area of hot springs where there were several springs of various kinds, some beautifully coloured, other seething with boiling water. Strokkur ("The Churn") is the only one that erupts regularly. Next we visited the majestic Gullfoss that stands on the river Hvitá. It is, in fact, two waterfalls at 90° to each other where, over the last 10,000 years, the river has cut a deep gorge into the sedimentary strata below.

All too soon the day had ended and we returned to the hotel where we enjoyed a delicious supper of Icelandic lamb, after which we gather in a corner of the dining room and held the daily log. Although the sky outside looked overcast we were optimistic and reassembled later to make an informed decision as to whether it was worth staying up for a chance of catching the northern lights or not. The decision was unanimous it wasn't, so with a long drive looming the following morning we retired to pack in preparation for the following day.

Day 3

Tuesday 16th September

Drive to Skaftafell (327 km)

Weather: Sunny; wind S 4m/s with temp 14°C

As we departed Gullfoss the weather looked very promising for what should be a very spectacular drive to the Óræfi district of south-east Iceland. Following a brief stop at Hella we soon arrived at Seljalandsfoss where the opportunity to experience the waterfall from behind its cascading curtain of water proved too irresistible for most. Slightly damp, we boarded the bus for the short ride to Skogáfoss and another spectacular waterfall complete with a double rainbow! The climb to the top of the falls was worth all the effort, the view was marvellous and it helped work-up an appetite before lunch.

Sunshine throughout the journey provided some breath-taking views of the greatest icecap in Europe, beneath which the vibrant heathland tapestry made the landscape appear as though on fire. We passed through the distinctive lava fields from the Lakki eruption, scene of the greatest lava eruption in human history in 1783 when 37km³ of lava flowed and caused the deaths of a third of the Iceland population. The ash-cloud also had a devastating impact across northern Europe, as far south as northern Spain, causing two-years of famine.

Before crossing the vast Skeiðarársandur, Kirkjubæjarklaustur provided a much welcomed coffee and comfort break. The enormity of this barren, flat landscape brought home the immense scale of the glacial eruption that occurred in 1996, sweeping through this region and destroying all vital communications to this remote community. It was not until we had arrived at Skaftafell could we really appreciate the reason why Iceland got its name; the area is dominated by the vast Vatnajökull glacier which is the largest glacier in the world outside the polar-regions and Iceland's highest peak Hvannadalshnúkur. This is a place where glaciers link sky and earth and the black lava sands vividly contrast with their brilliant whiteness.

Following a brief stop at the memorial to the flood, sculpted from wreckage of the bridges destroyed in the disaster, we soon arrived at the comfortable Skaftafell Hotel some nine hours later. Making the most of the stunning weather,

we deposited our luggage in our rooms and headed outside for a walk to the glacier snout, and for the more intrepid, venturing on to the ice!

After supper the clouds were gathering overhead and fearing the worse we decided to meet at 10pm to see how the weather situation had developed. Sadly, with almost total cloud-cover, there was little chance of seeing any lights tonight so we retired to our rooms, but kept a watchful eye on the sky. By 10.30pm the situation had improved and a chink in the clouds revealed our first opportunity of seeing the northern lights. As we gathered outside the cloud cover waxed and waned, while the insignificant vale of green behind the clouds increased its intensity. We stood under the night sky and watched as the northern lights appeared and faded for about 30 minutes, of which we had strong lights for about five minutes, even visible to the naked eye and leaving everyone to retire to bed happy having experienced the aurora.

Day 4

Wednesday 17th September

Jökulsárlón & Skaftafell National Park (122 km)

Weather: Low cloud, wind E 1m/s with temp 9°C

With low cloud enveloping the majestic mountains we decided to visit Skaftafell, the southern-most part of the Vatnajökull National Park first this morning. Established in 2008, this is Iceland's newest protected area with a total area of roughly 15,000 square kilometres, or 13% of its landmass, by far the largest national park in Iceland as well as in Western Europe. Its key features include the ice-cap of the Vatnajökull Glacier (8,200 square kilometres) and several highly active volcanic systems within and outside the ice-cap. The interplay of ice and fire is the single most important force in shaping the nature of the park. The protection of the Icelandic highlands has been called the largest environmental movement Iceland has ever seen, both in terms of conservation policy and sheer land mass. The environmental success story began in 1997, when the Icelandic Nature Conservation Association (INCA) was established with the primary objective of conservation and protecting Iceland's wilderness. INCA's goal was to establish a national park in the highlands, encompassing some 40% of Iceland's total land mass of about 100,000 square kilometres

Hvannadalshnúkur (2,110 metres) is the highest summit in Iceland perched on the rim of the caldera of a great volcano Öräfajökull and dominates the region. Öräfajökull is a strato-volcano like the recently erupting and now world famous Eyjafjallajökull in Iceland and Etna in Sicily. Since Iceland was settled in the 9th century it has erupted twice and will probably erupt again. Beneath the Vatnajökull glacier is a 260-kilometre long, narrow stretch of land that spans from the west of Skaftafell National Park to the town of Höfn on its eastern border. The lives of people of the region have been shaped and moulded according to the dictates of nature, in the region which, until as recently as 1974, was one of the most isolated parts of Iceland.

We enjoyed a leisurely walk to Svartifoss, one of the main attractions within the Skaftafell National Park and well-known for its underlying black basalt hexagonal columns; the inspiration for the design of the new church in Reykjavik. We had plenty of time to stroll through the scrublands and absorb its wonderful atmosphere before returning to the car park where the bus had been relocated. Before leaving we had time for a coffee while watching a video of the Park's ecology.

By midday we had travelled east through some spectacular scenery, albeit veiled by low cloud and mist, to Fjallsarlon where we had a spectacular backdrop of glaciers snout and icebergs over lunch. Next we visited Jökulsarlon, the renowned ice lagoon, for a cruise amongst 1,000 year old icebergs. Although the cloud-cover was low, the light was soft and wonderful for photography and once on board the amphibious-craft we were soon cruising amongst some amazing ice-sculptures learning all about ice and quickly filling memory cards with some awesome images! Later we walked to the sea following the ice-blocks to their eternal destiny and photographed those that had stranded like gems on the black lava sands. In spring this area is the main breeding ground for the North Atlantic population of Great Skua, so it was fitting that two birds should grace us with their presence before we departed. This area should also have had large numbers of geese at this time, refuelling before their final leg of migration to the UK, but they were absent this year. (It was later discovered that they were 10 days overdue because of the very late harvest in the north of Iceland)

All too soon it was time to retrace our journey back to the hotel. After another delicious supper Malcolm held a briefing in the reception and with little to no chance of seeing any lights tonight, we retired to pack in preparation for the long journey ahead.

Day 5

Thursday 18th September

Skaftafell - Northern Lights Inn (381 km)

Weather: Overcast, rain am with mist persisting pm; wind E 4m/s with temp 13°C

Before leaving Skaftafell this morning we couldn't resist a final visit to the glacier snout of Svinafelljökull, filming location of the latest Matt Damon blockbuster 'Interstellar'. It was an extra-ordinary experience to view the glacier from such a close distance; the silence, scale and the magnitude of effects of climate change were all too obvious and difficult to comprehend.

Returning to Route 1 we crossed the flat infertile outwash plain of Skeidarársandur heading north-west. We stopped briefly to photograph the cushions of grey-green racomytrum moss that now softened the extensive lava that once devastated so much of this land and caused havoc across much of northern Europe in the late 17th century.

Arriving in Vik we had time for coffee and a little retail therapy before taking a lunch break at Skogáfoss. Next we visited the museum there and spent a magical hour and a half lost amongst an amazing collection of artefacts assembled by one man during his lifetime. Just before arriving in Selfoss, the second largest settlement in the south, we made a brief visit to the Wool Centre, a co-operative of Icelandic lady knitters making and selling their beautiful products. Eventually, after a long day we arrived at the very comfortable Northern Light Inn.

After diner and the daily log and with little to no prospects of any aurora this evening, we retired to our cosy rooms in preparation for a day at sea the next morning.

Day 6

Friday 19th September

Pelagic & Reykjavik (125 km)

Weather: Low cloud, mist and rain; wind SW 4m/s with temp 9°C

Low cloud and murky rain best describes the weather during our drive to Reykjavik this morning. We arrived at the impressive church, Hallgrímskirkja that dominates the city skyline, followed by a brief tour through the streets of this vibrant capital. We had just over two hours to experience and enjoy the cosmopolitan ambience of this northerly city before boarding the ship for a whale-watching cruise.

Once on board the ship most opted to wear the thermal ‘onesies’ before we left the harbour. The sea was calm, although the side wind did cause a little rocking motion at times, but nothing too bad. After sailing for almost two hours the whales were proving to be very elusive, however the bird-watching was good and we had many plunge diving Gannets, guillemots and Manx Shearwaters amongst the many Fulmars. The biggest surprise was the presence (and numbers) of Sooty Shearwaters.

A pod of four White-beaked Dolphins passed quickly by without pausing to stop, and a flock of gulls in a feeding frenzy alerted us to the possibilities of whales being present. We didn’t have long to wait before making brief contact with two Minke Whales, although they appeared intent on feeding rather than entertaining tourists. After more time searching we encountered a third Minke, ‘Humpy’, but like the previous two whales, ‘Humpy’ also seemed reluctant to play on this occasion. With our time at sea fast running out the ship returned to the harbour.

Back on board the bus we visited Seltjarnarnes and found a few birds before we visited Bessastaðir, official residence of Iceland’s Prime-minister, and then returned to the hotel.

Convivial chat and good natured banter combined with a delicious supper made our last evening’s dinner together very enjoyable. After the customary daily log and with no possibilities of seeing the lights this evening we retired to pack.

Day 7

Saturday 20th September

Grindavik & return flight UK (88 km)

Weather: Overcast and light rain; wind SW 4 with temp 9°C

With luggage packed and hotel accounts settled we headed off to explore the Reykjanes peninsula this morning. First we visited the surreal landscape of bubbling mud pots and steaming fumaroles at Gunnuhver. Next we continued passed the lighthouse down to Skalafell. Here we paid homage to the Great Auk, its image immortalised in bronze, poignantly facing out towards Eldey, the island of its extinction on the 3rd June 1844. We watched the wild Atlantic rollers dissipate energy on the black lava rocks creating some spectacular coastal scenery, before visiting the site where the Mid-Atlantic Ridge makes its first visual appearance on land in Iceland. We walked across the small bridge that links two of the World’s greatest tectonic plates, before travelling on to Keflavik.

After a visit to a nearby wetland site and lunch, it was sadly time to return to the airport for the flight back to the UK with some wonderful memories of amazing scenery and, albeit briefly, the magic of northern lights. We said our farewells to Malcolm at check-in and disappeared upstairs to the departures lounge.

Species Lists

Birds (✓ recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	14	September					
				15	16	17	18	19	20
1	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	1	2					
2	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				2			
3	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>						80	
5	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>						60	
6	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassana</i>						60	5
7	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				6		10	6
8	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	20	12	15	8	40	24	3
9	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>						3	5
10	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>			1	3			
11	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>				47	30		
12	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>				1			
14	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>						10	35
15	Eurasian Teal	<i>Ansa crecca crecca</i>					3		
16	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		4	4		24	✓	2
17	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		30			15	6	
18	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>					17	✓	10
19	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>						5	
20	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>						1	
21	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus gryllre</i>						1	
22	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1	1		4	1	
23	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	10	40	250	7	200		20
24	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				5			6
25	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritime</i>				3			
26	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		10			50		
27	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>				2			
28	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓					✓
29	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				✓		2	
30	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>						10	
31	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	✓			
32	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>						15	12
33	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>						2	
34	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			2	2		2	1
35	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>		6	20	10	12	6	2
36	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>			6		4	✓	
37	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>					1		3
38	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			3	3	2		
40	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenathe</i>			1		2	2	1
41	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		2					
42	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		1		1			
43	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	6	12	2	20	10	2
44	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		24	20	✓	12	✓	✓
45	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>				15	30		

	Common name	Scientific name	14	September					
				15	16	17	18	19	20

Mammals

1	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				8			
2	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>						3	
3	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>						4	

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